

Spiritual Communion

S. C. Hughson, O.H.C.

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FOREWORD

May we venture to hope that this Paper will not be read merely as a more or less interesting bit of theological instruction, but that it will lead many to revive practically in their daily lives what for them is a lost Catholic devotion, and which will open to them new and rich reservoirs of grace which, perhaps through no fault of their own, have been hitherto sealed to them.

S. C. H.

Spiritual Communion

I.

THE Book of Common Prayer is not intended primarily, as some have thought, to be a summary of Christian theology. True, it contains the Catechism and the Offices of Instruction, but important as these are, they are not common prayer. The Prayer Book is a collection of Services and Prayers, authorized to be used by the congregation assembled in church for common worship.

However, according to the principle expressed in the proverb, "*Lex orandi, lex credendi*," The law of praying is the law of believing," much of what the Christian is required to believe will inevitably find place, either expressed or implied, in any authorized book of Offices and Prayers.

We are all familiar with the profound teaching which is embodied in the Office of the Eucharist, and in those of Matins and Evensong, but a large part of the Prayer Book is made up of what are commonly

called the "Occasional Offices," being forms of services such as those for Baptism, Confirmation, Visitation of the Sick, Ordinations, etc. These are intended only for special occasions, and there are many parishes in which certain of these Offices have never been used, with the result that many devout folk who have never attended these Services, and not being given to a study of the Prayer Book, are wholly ignorant of the teaching found in them, to their no small spiritual hurt.

One of the most unfortunate and widespread of these ignorances is concerning Spiritual Communion, the doctrine of which is to be found only in the Office for the Communion of the Sick, than which there are few more important or more neglected Offices in all the range of Anglican formularies. We speak of it as one of the most unfortunate ignorances for it is not only an unhappy intellectual ignorance, but it is one which affects directly and disastrously the personal spiritual life of God's people, cutting them off as it does to a tragic degree from one of the most gracious operations of God's love in the souls of men.

How many of our lay-folk who read this page have heard of Spiritual Communion? God has prepared

for them a rich daily banquet of the best things the kingdom of heaven affords, but many of them do not even know that so generous a board is spread for them. How much more would God be glorified, and to what high degree of holiness would souls be raised, if men and women were taught to approach the throne of grace in this manner which the love and mercy of God has ordained for them.

II.

IT is a principle which has ever been adhered to in the Universal Church that where a soul is debarred by conditions which it cannot control from using the normally appointed means of sacramental grace, God does not permit it to suffer from want of His gifts where the condition is no fault of its own. The Church, for example, has always regarded those who have an earnest wish to receive baptism, but die before the sacrament can be administered, as regenerated and saved by the grace of what is called the baptism of desire.

The same principle holds in regard to Holy Communion. There are three ways in which Communion may be received. First, the mere physical reception

of the Sacramental species of Bread and Wine. Such was the Communion of those sinning Corinthians whom St. Paul warned lest they should eat and drink to their condemnation. They received the outward and visible Sign, but because of their sin and lack of repentance, they could not worthily receive the inward and spiritual grace of the Presence and loving power of Christ. The second mode of reception is Spiritual Communion, the receiving from God of the full grace and benefit of a good Communion, though because of some legitimate hindrance, the Sacrament itself is not partaken of. The third mode is the receiving of both the outward Sign and the inward and spiritual grace which God pours in abundance into the hearts of those who love and desire Him. This last is the highest and fullest form of Communion. The essential thing, however, that which alone makes Communion worthy and beneficial, namely, the inner Presence of the dear Lord Christ with all the glorious benefits which accompany His Presence, can be received at any time in Spiritual Communion.

Here we turn to the invaluable teaching of the Occasional Offices. In the first of the two rubrics at the end of the Office for the Communion of the

Sick, the direction is given definitely that where one is not able by reason of extremity of sickness, or any other legitimate impediment, to receive the Sacrament, the priest shall instruct him that "if he do repent him of his sins, and steadfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the cross for him, and shed His Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefor, he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth." Here we have clearly stated one of the most precious and necessary principles which the Church offers her children.

This instruction which is so explicit in the Prayer Book has been the teaching and practice of the Church from the beginning. It has ever been held that in all cases of legitimate hindrance, the necessary gifts of grace that we are not able to receive through the normal sacramental channels, will none the less be given to us by the love and mercy of God, if we use faithfully, as far as we are able, the means which God has prepared for us. No soul need ever lack the grace of Holy Communion.

Nor is this privilege confined to the sick. Dr. Darwell Stone, treating of certain teaching of the early Church concerning Communion says, "Of scarcely less importance from the moral point of view, is the insistence on the possibility of Spiritual Communion for those who desire to receive the Body of Christ sacramentally, and are unable to do so."

As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine in his commentary on our Lord's Eucharistic discourse recorded in St. John vi, states it as a truth to be accepted without question, that "to believe in Him is to eat the Living Bread. He who believes eats. He is invisibly fed because he is invisibly re-born."

In the pre-Reformation Church the direction given the priest, corresponding to the Prayer Book rubric we have considered, seems to have been taken directly from St. Augustine. In much briefer form than our Anglican rubric, in the old York and Sarum Manuals the priest is instructed to say to the sick person, "Brother, In this case real faith is sufficient for thee and good intention. Believe, and thou hast eaten." This last sentence of this exhortation is an exact quotation from St. Augustine—"*Crede, et manducasti*, Believe and thou hast eaten." (*On St. John's Gospel*, xxv. 12.)

III.

SPIRITUAL Communion may be had by the faithful soul at any time, under any circumstances. Thomas à Kempis rejoices in the fact of this blessed privilege. "Every devout person," he says, "on every day and at every hour may profitably and unimpeded, draw near to Christ in Spiritual Communion." Indeed, such Communion may be made so repeatedly and with such frequency as to create a constant flow of the grace of the Body and Blood of our Lord into the soul so that in practice one may be said to be making a continual Communion. Wherever one may be, in whatever occupation he may be engaged, there is required only a devout lifting of the heart to God with the prayer and the intention that He impart the grace of His Sacrament to us.

This does not mean, however, that Spiritual Communion is ever to be made lightly or casually. It should in every instance be as solemn and reverent an act as our Sacramental Communion even on the greatest feasts. Many devout souls make use of an Office of Spiritual Communion, such as will be found at the end of this Paper, and such use is full of edification, and is to be advised at regular times. But

none the less, the raising of the heart to God with devout and right intention is all that is essential to gaining in the secret places of the soul this transcending blessing.

The occasions on which one can make a Spiritual Communion are without number. Where one is taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, but not receiving the Sacrament, he would naturally make a Spiritual Communion. If one were prevented from being present at Mass on Sunday, or other day of obligation, he would make a spiritual Communion with his other devotions, and under this condition it would be fitting that he make the Communion with something more of prayers and acts of worship than at other times. Periods of stress and suffering, whether of mind or body, are those when Spiritual Communion would be especially desirable and helpful; or, on anniversaries or occasions which call for special devotion. It is not necessary to note further what these occasions may be, for as à Kempis assures us, there is no time when, should God put the thought into one's mind, Spiritual Communion may not be made "profitably and unimpeded."

What could be a more gracious offering to a loving God who has guarded us through the defenceless

hours of the night than for us the moment we rise in the morning to kneel immediately by the bedside, and make an act of Spiritual Communion? Thus would we begin the day with God, giving Him its first fruits, and the first fruits would be the pledge of what all the day would be. By such an exercise we would set in conscious motion the great current of love between our hearts and the loving Heart of God, the silent flow of which is unceasing. As God never ceases to be lovingly conscious of us, so we would, consciously or unconsciously, be ever aware of Him. It is not required that we have always a direct mental attention to Him. Père Grou tells us that a distinction is to be made between "the prayer of the mind," which require a definite mental advertence to Him, and "the prayer of the heart" which makes no such requirement. "I sleep but my heart waketh."

IV.

IT has been wisely recommended as a good and edifying practice to transport oneself in spirit to some spot where it is known that the Eucharist is being celebrated, and join oneself in the Service, and make one's Spiritual Communion along with

the faithful who are there receiving the Sacrament. Indeed this can be done at any time of the day or night, for there is never a moment in the twenty-four hours when somewhere in the world the Holy Mysteries are not being offered for God's glory and for the benefit of His people.

It would be easy with a little calculation as to the time, to follow the kindling of altar fires across the world, moving in imagination with the dawn as it presses its westward way around the globe. In the early morning I kneel before an altar on the Atlantic Coast. An hour later a thousand priests are standing before their altars far to the west, and the forenoon has not run its course ere we have passed to the altars on the shores of the great western ocean, and on to join in spirit with God's people in the islands of the sea, amid the icy wastes of Alaska, and the wide spaces of the Australian continent. And as night draws on, and the day with us is done, Christian souls in the ancient cities of the east, in India and Cathay, and on the broad deserts of Asia, are beginning their day with God in humble loving worship before his altars. And so we can follow all the day long the majestic Eucharistic progress which circles the earth every twenty-four hours, having our

part in that never-ceasing worship, for time and space count for nothing in this great venture.

But the close of our day does not bring our pilgrimage to an end. Should one awake in the dark hours of the night, he can reflect that in holy places without number, as the dawn continues its unbroken sweep across the wide meridians of longitude the great Offering is being lifted up, and we can have our part in it before we return to our slumbers. Perhaps indeed God awoke us from sleep just to give us opportunity of paying homage to Him, and of rejoicing in the fruits of such blessed Communion. Thus with God's children of a hundred races we can make our Communion, and thrill to the consciousness of the Communion of Saints in the Mystical Body of Christ.

V.

NOTHING can be more beautiful and edifying to our souls than these thoughts, but there is a warning to be given. Spiritual Communion, where Sacramental Communion can be had, is not a substitute. It would be no Communion at all, but rather a sin of serious character if one through sloth or carelessness sought to make a Spiritual Communion

rather than going to church on days of obligation for the appointed celebration of the Eucharist. Spiritual Communion is to be regarded as a very blessed complement to Sacramental Communion, but it is never to displace it. In Spiritual Communion, (unless we are taking part in the actual Service of the Mass), we do not in bodily presence participate in the Offering of the Sacrifice of the Altar, the pleading of the Offering on Calvary, the showing of the Lord's death till He come, which is a positive requirement on all Sundays and other days of obligation, where possible.

Furthermore, because it is a fuller entering into the great Sacrifice which our Lord instituted for His Father's glory, and for the sanctification of our souls, there is a greater Gift in Sacramental Communion, rich and precious as are those which we receive in Spiritual Communion. Thomas à Kempis in the same passage we have quoted, adds the injunction: "Yet on certain days and at times appointed, he ought to receive the Body of His Redeemer sacramentally, with affectionate reverence, and rather seek the honour and glory of God than his own consolation." We are also to remember the words of the Apostle, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves

together" (Heb. x. 25.) This refers to the Offering of the Eucharist which for some centuries after our Lord's Ascension, was the only corporate worship known to the Church.

There is, none the less, a certain real grace to be gained in joining spiritually in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice wherever it is being celebrated, although it cannot take the place of our actual presence at the Mass. In the act of Spiritual Communion itself, one does ordinarily unite himself with the Eucharist Oblation wherever it is being made.

VI.

JUST what is the method to be employed in making a Spiritual Communion? It is not to be received passively. There is something that the soul has to do in order to lay hold of the Blessed Gift. There has to be a cooperation with the Holy Spirit who in all these sacred endeavours is our leader and guide.

As in every act of devotion, there must be a double act of the will; first deliberately withdrawing our thought and attention away from all other considerations, and second, setting the attention

powerfully upon God and the great thing we are about to do, with joyful anticipation of the blessing which we have certain assurance that God is about to bestow upon us. To cultivate this sense of assurance we must develop the habit of making strong and repeated acts of trust in God, dismissing always with a prompt uprising of the will any doubt or question of God's loving Providence which the tempter might suggest.

It might sound as though this preparation would require some length of time, but not so, if indeed we have by loving application and industry learned the nature of these things and how to practise them. It is like the unexpected meeting of an old friend. You are walking in the streets of a strange city. Suddenly you come face to face with one whom you have long loved, whom you have not seen in many years. You do not have to take time to gather yourself together. In a single flash you realize the presence of your friend, and what his presence means to you.

VII.

IN most books of devotion compiled for private use we find prayer-forms for Spiritual Communion.

Whatever superficial differences they show, they follow much the same pattern. They begin with a protestation of desire to unite with God's people in spirit wherever the Eucharist is being offered, and an act of faith in our Lord's Presence in the Holy Sacrament, followed by acts of adoration and love, and a prayer that the Lord Christ would enter into the soul and abide there. Or, any ejaculation of faith and love and holy desire, a line from some familiar hymn, perhaps such as, "Come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my Heart for Thee," is sufficient. The advantage of the briefer acts are that they require only a few seconds of time, and can be used in a moment's pause in the midst of some busy occupation, or as one passes from one part of the house to another, or while walking along a crowded street. These precious fragments of time are too often lost in blankness of mind, in idle dreaming, or in running from one foolish distraction to another, the attention being caught by every idle object upon which the eye chances to fall. But, on the other hand, they can be made periods of blessed Communion to the honour of our Lord and to the further sanctifying of our souls by filling them with the unspeakable Gifts of the divine love.

VIII.

SINCE the faithful soul receives in Spiritual Communion the same effects and benefits of the Body and Blood of Christ as in Sacramental Communion, it will be for our edification and encouragement to refresh the mind from time to time as to just what these benefits are. It is impossible to limit in any way the range of the benefits received in Holy Communion. The Eucharist is not limited to the imparting of some special grace as are certain other Sacraments, baptism, for example, imparting the grace of the new birth; and so the Eucharist is the source and fountain-head of the spiritual life. The other Sacraments develop the gift received in baptism, while the Eucharist is the complement of all the other Sacraments, by which the spiritual life of the soul is crowned and brought to perfection. It is a perennial fountain of sanctification and perfection. The Eucharist is a universal Sacrament, and there is nothing in man's moral or spiritual nature which is not augmented and strengthened by Holy Communion.

Spiritual teachers through the Christian ages have, however, taught that Holy Communion has four

general effects which are inclusive of all the blessings and gifts that God may bestow.

First, Holy Communion perfects more and more, and conserves, the supernatural life of the soul, giving us an increase of sanctifying grace through this special act of union with our Lord.

Second, Holy Communion strengthens and gives greater moral compactness to our union with Christ, our Head, and with our fellow-members of His Mystical Body, drawing us into so close a unity that we are able to live knit together as one in the Communion of Saints, each soul sharing with every other soul all blessings and graces received.

Third, Holy Communion remits all venial sin, and diminishes the power of concupiscence, thus enabling us the more readily on the one hand to resist temptation, and on the other to do in all things the will of God.

Fourth, since both in time and in eternity we are to glorify God in our bodies as well as in our spirits, Holy Communion restores progressively to the body that integrity, that spiritual wholeness, which the race lost in Adam's sin, thus preparing the body for a glorious resurrection, and, united once more with the soul, for a blessed immortality in the life to come.

If we study the implications of these effects, we shall gain an appreciation of the ineffable richness of what God has done for us in making it possible for us, as à Kempis says, "on every day and at every hour" to receive Him and all His benefits in Spiritual Communion. This realization will surely urge us on with an irresistible urge to lay hold constantly upon what God has thus prepared for them that love Him.

IX.

OF course it is taken for granted that the soul will be as well prepared through contrition and love for Spiritual Communion as for receiving the Sacrament Itself; and also that it will always be filled with a spirit of thanksgiving for that with which the goodness of God has endowed it. This contrition and thanksgiving may and should consist of constant acts, but they are never to be thought of as isolated acts. Contrition and gratitude are permanent states of the soul, while the acts are the expression of those states.

In our preparation for Communion, whatever mode we employ, whether Spiritual or Sacramental, we are bound to consider the greatness and the

Majesty of Him who is present hidden beneath the species of Bread and Wine. We must ponder the love, the unspeakable goodness, which does not disdain, but ever longs, to be united with us. Then we turn from this consideration to that of our own misery and sinfulness; and from these two considerations flow mingled sentiments of humility and desire—humility at the sight of our own sinfulness, desire, as we behold the unspeakable loveliness of our Lord, who through our Communion transforms us into Himself.

Let us find a summing up of the holy and transcending effects of Communion, both Sacramental and Spiritual, in the words of a devout teacher: "We become one with Jesus. That is, we have the same 'will' that He has. What He loves, we love; what He desires, we desire; what He says ought to be done we long to do, and do; His judgments are ours; His behaviour under every kind of condition is the behaviour we are always striving to reproduce in our own life and action." (Hedley, *A Retreat*, p. 279)

An Office of Spiritual Communion

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Our Father:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify Thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

O Gracious and Merciful God, I desire to present to Thee the offering of a broken and contrite heart. I grieve that I have ever offended Thee who art so good. Forgive me for Jesus' sake, and by the grace of Thy most loving pardon, strengthen me that I may never again offend Thee. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come

under my roof, but speak the word only, and Thy servant shall be healed. (*3 times*)

In union, dear Lord, with the faithful at every altar of the Church where Thy Blessed Body and Blood are being offered to the Father, I desire to offer Thee praise and thanksgiving. I believe that Thou art truly present in the Holy Sacrament. And since I cannot at this time receive Thee sacramentally, I beseech Thee to come spiritually into my soul. I unite myself unto Thee, and embrace Thee with all the affections of my heart. Let me never be separated from Thee. Let me live and die in Thy Love. Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus, dwell in Thy servant in the fullness of Thy strength, in the perfection of Thy ways, and in the holiness of Thy Spirit, and rule over every hostile power in the might of Thy Spirit, and to the glory of Thy Father. Amen.

May the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve my body and soul unto everlasting life. Amen.

Blessed, praised and adored be Jesus Christ on His throne of glory in heaven, and in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. Amen.

The Order of the Holy Cross is a monastic community for men in the Episcopal Church.